MAITHILA LIFE IN MICA PAINTINGS OF PURNEA HAVELI

BY

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The land of Mithilā is reputed as an independent contributor to the vast cultural entity of the Indian sub-continent. Since the days of Janaka and Yājñyavalkya, it always produced in every age some stalwarts, who used to take the lead in expanding the horizon of human knowledge. History alone can display the works of those generations of Mahāmaho-pādhyāyas who contributed to and maintained the great Sanskrit culture up to the present time— a tradition so rare to exist in only the few places of India.

This marriage-like bond of the land of Mithilā with the Sanskrit learning since time immemorial has shaped the Maithila culture in the style of Yajñas, rituals etc. It is in these things that the roots of the values governing Maithila life are lying. The Yajñas and rituals, which dominated all, once long, long ago from dawn to dusk--projected bases not only of social relationships, but also of cultural activities. Painting has always been a conspicuous part of Maithila cultural activities. It is known as *Aripaṇa Lekha* in Mithilā. It is said that the king Janaka started this at the time of the marriage ceremony of Rāma and Sītā.[1] Whatever be its origin, it is done on walls and floors through the help of only limited colours containing symbolic meanings. Archer styles them as "Maithil Painting", which in its essentials is the painting of Maithila Brāhmaṇas and Kāyasthas".[2]

Upendra Thakur holds the same view and further writes, "These Paintings have always been temporary because of their dependence on walls, generally made of mud which account for their fading away so soon.

The fact, however, remains that this act of painting has been carried on from times immemorial to the present day as a part of culture...The most peculiar characteristic of the Maithila painting has been that the

1 Lakshminatha Jha, *Mithilā Kī Sāṅskritika Loka Chitrakalā*, p. 21, Pulished by Lakshminatha Jha, 1962.

2 *Marg*, Edited by Mulkraj Anand, Vol. III, No. 3, p. 25.

painting is done entirely by the house-hold ladies as an ordinary domestic art...Thus linked to the domestic and ritual traditions of the area Maithila Painting has been as natural and as necessary as sweeping the courtyard and going to a well''.[3]

These remarks by Thakur reflect some peculiarities of the said Maithila painting. It became entirely a women's faculty and thus overlapped with the sexual division of labour. While its relationship with the domestic life made it permanent with the Maithila culture, its importance with rituals only made it temporary on walls.

The fusion of art, painting, social relationship etc. into a ritualistic order hindered this style of painting from growing towards further sophistication. Although credit goes to it links with the ritual tradition for its survival merely on the finger-tips of the ladies of Mithilā, yet ritualism can alone be responsible for attaching a social compulsion on its immobility. Robert K. Merton has pointed out this character of ritual in some other context. "Ritualism involves the abandoning or scali g down of the lofty cultural goals of great pecuniary success and rapid social mobility to the point where one's aspirations can be satisfied. But though one rejects the cultural obligations to attempt to get ahead in the world, though one draws in one's horizons, one continues to abide almost compulsively by institutional norms''.[4]

Thus this painting, once engineered in some unknown past, continues upto this day without being either stopped, or intervened or mixed by any other cultural styles. Yet, it never means that the land of Mithilā was isolated throuhout the ages after those great Paurāṇic sages, and it experienced no diffusion of people, culture and society.

Like many other parts of India, the territory of Mithilā has been subject to multi-dimensional changes. As a name it remained one with culture, but so far as political recognition is concerned, it dispersed into many. Consequently during the Mughal age and the following British rule, many petty estates emerged. Each entertained the impact of time with the result that more dimensions were added to the Maithila culture. The same can be said about the painting also.

The present paper is intended to add although entirely different in style and practice, yet another chapter to Archer's Mithila School of Painting,

3 Upendra Thakur, *History of Mithila* (pp. 386-87), Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, 1956.

4 Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, pp. 149-150, The Freepress of Glenco. 1963.

on the basis of some thirty four painted mica sheets. These mica-sheets were available to the author from Kameshwar Jha of village Lohna, District—Darbhanga. The latter informed that his ancestors got them with many other valuable things from Late Raja Bijoy Gobind Singh, the last king of Haveli Paragana etate. He was the son of Babu Bhaiyalal Jha—a Śrotrya Brāhmṇa. The former was adopted as a successor by Rani Indravati[5] after her husband Raja Indranarain Singh died childless. Raja Bijoy Gobind Singh lost the estate duridg his own life time.[6] He died leaving behind him one son and two daughters. His son died in his early years without any issue left behind and one of the two dauters was married to the grand father of Kameshwar Jha. Thus Kameshwar Jha comes fourth in the daughter's line of Raja Bijoy Gobind Singh.[7] So these painted mica sheets originally belong to the Haveli Paragana or Haveli Purnea estate.[8] Buchanan reports that "the whole of this division is situated in Mithila."[9] Although "so little is known of the district until the 17th century that not even the names of its faujdars or military governors have been recorded",[10] yet, Buchanan traces the existence of this estate since relatively ancient time. "The only remains of times in any degree ancient that are to be found in this division are round Jivat Pukhar, a place of worship nine or ten miles north from the town.. .. .. This Raja Basant would appear to have been the Chief Proprietor of Sarkar Purnea, before it came into the possession of the family by which it was lately held."[11] The way Buchanan says about the ancient remains, suggests that it might have been established not before two or three centuries back. Anyway, it can be easily derived that in the eighteenth century, it existed with a considerable possession and a revenue of Rs. 374000 only.[12] The same source confirms that Raja Indranarain Singh was alive in the year 1738.[13] After his death, (year not known), Rani

5 *Bengal District Gazetteers, Purnea*, by L. S. S. O'Malley I. C. S., p. 189. Calcutta.

6 *Ibid.*

7 *Pañjī of Maithila Brāhmaṇas.*

8 *Bengal District Gazetteer, Purnea*, p. 189.

9 *An Account of the District of Purnea in* 1809-10, p. 61. Published under Bihar & Orissa Research Society by Buchanan.

10 *Bengal District Gazetteer*, p. 35.

11 *An Account of the District of Purnea*, p. 61.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 509.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 508.



Fig. 1.

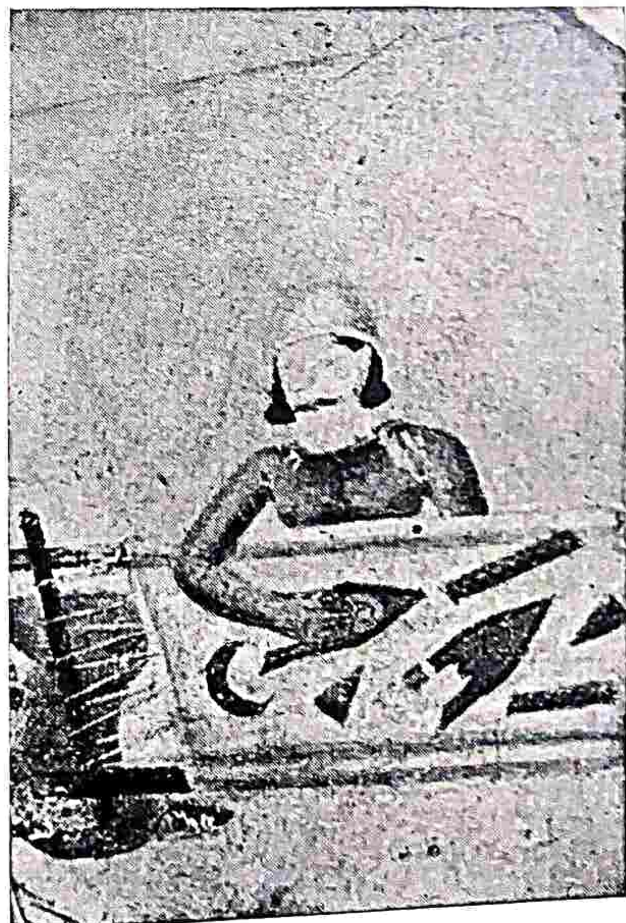


Fig. 2.



Fig. *3*.



Fig. 4



Fig. 5.

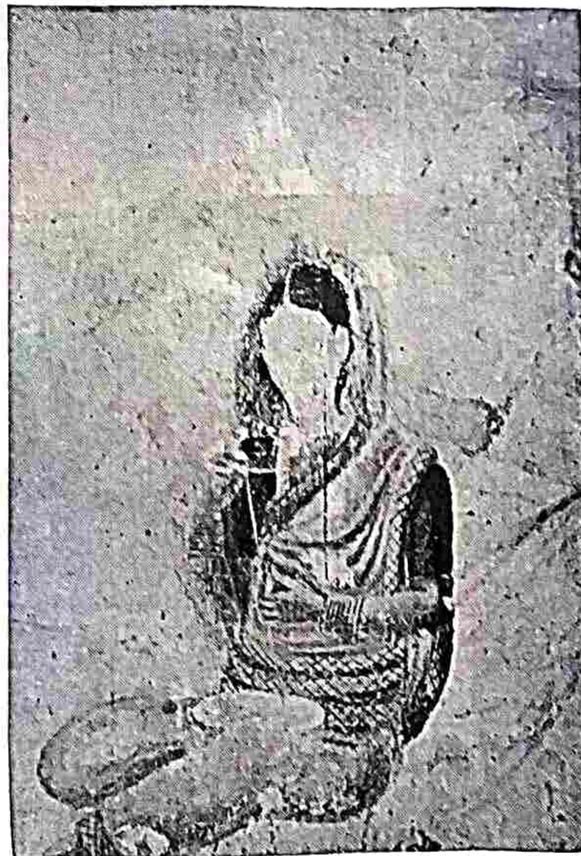


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.

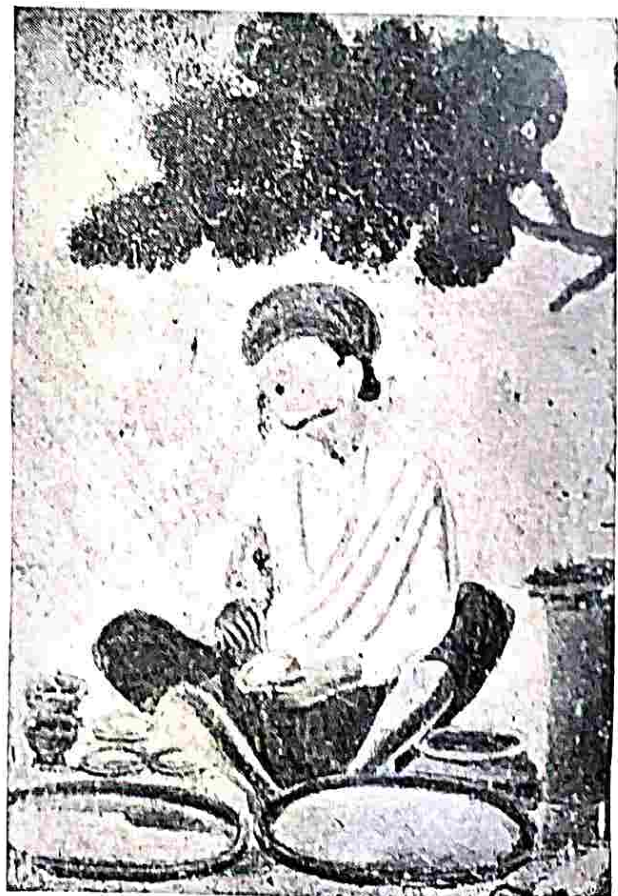


Fig. 8.

Indrabati assumed the charge and at the time of permanent settlement the Haveli Purnea was presided over by her.[14]

Thus, this much is beyond doubt that till the end of the eighteenth century, Haveli Purnea was a big and attractive state, large enough to provide shelter to migrating families of painters, scholars or artists etc, from Murshidabad after 1760. The development and decay of political and economic conditions in Murshidabad are very deeply entangled with the history of Indian Painting.

The collapse of the Mughal empire after Aurangzeb was accompanied with the decentralization of art. This decentralization according to Archer resulted into two types of painting. "On the one hand, it gave a fresh impetus to painting in the Pahari Hindu Courts of Northern India, and on the other hand an Anglo Indian style arose to which Rai Krishna Das has given the term 'Company' or 'Firangi' art. Concerning this latter art very little is so far known except that whenever there were company settlements, as in Lahore, Mathura, Benaras, Tanjore and Murshidabad, parallel types of painting grew up".[15] Murshidabad was then a great centre of Commerce. It attracted the attention of the painters who left the Central Court, perhaps with a mind that the former would provide a greater market. But after some 30 years, Murshidabad also grew towards decline and conditions once again compelled the painters to seek shelter somewhere else.[16] After 1750, painters started migrating. It is in these migrating families, Manuk found the ancestor of Patna Painters.[17] In absence of any record regarding the total number of painters, it is difficult to say that all of them migrated to Patna. Since Purnea is geographically a convenient place for migration from Murshidabad and at the same time the estate, there, was also economically quite substantial it is by all means much probable that some of the families of painters might have gone to this estate. This probability further gives room to reality when one finds that the painting on mica sheets was done for the first time in Murshidabad only.[18]

It is very impressive to note that Murshidabad, only in a span of thirty years, gave rise to "Firangi Art" and it is here for the first time probably that mica was introduced to the universe of painting.

14 *Bengal District Gazetteer*, p. 189.

15 Mildred Archer, *Patna Painting*, p. VII, David Marlowe Ltd. for the Royal India Society, 1948.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

17 *The Journal of the Bihar Research Society*, Vol. XXIX, pt. 3, pp. 136-147.

18 Mildred Archer, *Patna Painting*, p. 3.

The paintings on the mica-sheets available to the author are a good example of Firangi art. There is no mention of the artists, who did all. Since, the Haveli Purnea was unfortunately dismembered after Raja Bijoy Gobind Singh, who lost it by his sheer misfortune, it is no more possible to get available records, files, and any other possessions of historical importance. The decaying years of the grand Haveli could have seen only the departure of its assets in kind and person, not their destination nor their whereabouts. These painted mica-sheets are the only source, which suggest the potentiality of Maithila Painting of 18th-19th centuries patronized by the Purnea Haveli.

Of Firangi or Company art, Archer has written, "It marks the fusion of Eastern and Western taste."[19] The paintings on the mica sheets consist of Maithila figures, life and habits done in the western technique. They are not "a pattern of coloured shapes and lines"[20] nor "showing at the same moment the outside, the inside and the top of house".[21] The figures are three-dimensional. The dresses of the males are mostly Moghul, while those of the females are peculiarly Maithila. The sex life is painted on six sheets in different poses. Since in almost all the sheets, the faces have disappeared due to rough handling for last many years, it is difficult to recognize that the partners (male & female) are the same in all the six. The pattern of the dresses is the same, but the colours are different.

Materials and Technique

In absence of any record left by the painters it is very difficulty to know how Brush work on mica could stand there for generations. They must have mixed some chemical in water colour so that the painting might be permanent. So far as the colour-scheme is concerned, it mainly consists of green, gamboge, fleshred, sienne and white. It is clear that the scheme is quite simple, but not at all primitive. They leave some realistic touches in the human figures. The strokes of the brush are, however, delicate, but not subtle. The artist never symbolises or suggests any spiritual values nor any historic sense of the contemporary life. There is very little of oriental mysticism and figures have very little of movement. It seems that the artists had very less knowledge of human anatomy. Although they succceded in giving a three dimensional impression to the

19 Mildred Archer, *Patna Painting* (David Marlowe Ltd. 1948), p. VII.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

21 *Iibd.*

human figures and the land-scapes in the background. Yet the gestures and postures hardly display anatomical beauty. In most of the cards, faces are absent. They have disappeared in the mean time due to rough handling and other climatic effects. The other parts of the body and dresses are present but the sign of fading is obvioue ther. Some minute work is done on the dresses to the effect of light and shade, but the proportion of the length and thickness of hands and feet does not appear very accurate.

Broadly all the painted cards can be put into three categories. The first category consists of twenty three cards, all with human figures displaying the then social and occupational habits. In the second category, there are six cards depicting the then sexual life. In all of them the partners are in the pose of copulation. Except in one, they are not naked but the dresses look luxurious. But the female partner is always shown with ornaments. But, they hardly reflect any impression of Vātsyāyana's *Kāma Sūtra*.

The rests of the cards (5) can be put in the third category in which the then recreational activities have been pāinted. There are human figures doing physical exercises with some musical instruments for recreation. This is still practised by a particular group called "Naṭa" in the enteriors of Darbhanga and Purnea. This group is not a new emergence. Jyotirīśvara in his famous book "Varṇaratnākara"[22] has also mentioned the name "Neṭa", of a group of people in service to king.

Descriptions

Figure I shows a female figure preparing a garland of flowers sitting on a floor. The face has disappeared. Hairs on the head are disinct of black colour. The ear-ring is clearly shown in white and light cobalt blue colour. The Maithila word for this is "Karṇafūla". Its design has not changed and is used by Maithila ladies for centuries. The face of a Maithili lady has been shown with the similar "Karṇafūla" in "*Mithilā Kī Sāṅskritika Loka Chitrakalā*".[23] The dress is divided into two parts—upper and lower. The upper cloth by which the body has been wrapped is of chrome yellow colour with shades done by the help of deep vermilion. The lower cloth is of deep and light cobalt blue. The hands are of deep and light burnt sienna; bangles of vermilion, garland of white mixed

22 *Varṇa-Ratnākara* of Jyotirīśvara-Kaviśekharāchārya (p. 10), Bibliotheca Indica, A collection of Oriental series, Ed. by Suniti Kumar Chatterjee & Babua Mishra, Published by Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Park street, Calcutta 1940.

23 p. 141.

with spots of cobalt blue; basket of chrome yellow with linings of black and vermilion. The appearance is quite realistic. The brush work is so fine that the basket even now looks like a real one with all strings. But the lack of anotomical knowledge is obvious in the action of the right hand.

Figure 2 shows a weaver in action. The turban is of light cobalt blue colour mixed with white colour. Some clots of black hair are falling up to the neck in both sides which makes the appearance quite lively. The face has disappeared. The body is of burnt sienna. The muscles are not clear. The fingers are on the implement, but the artist has failed to show any sign of speed there. The frame is well prepared. The colour is chocolate brown. This frame is kept tight by the help of strings of white and cobalt blue colour. The implements are all primitive. Behind the frame, the artist has very nicely placed one table of burnt sienna with the black stripes. The arrangement of all things has been done in a way to make the picture complete with life.

Fig. 3 shows a lady cooking something. She has a wrapper of carmine colour, lower cloth of vermilion, the oven is very light chocolate brown; the wood pieces used as fuel are of the same colour; the flame is brilliant red with light yellow; the implements are of blue grey tint with black, art yellow and white. The style of cooking is the same what is done to-day. The implements are also the same as those of to-day. The presentation is quite appropriate except that there is one branch of tree shown above. Cooking is always done inside the house. The presence of that branch makes the situation a bit unrealistic. The colour of the leaves is spoilt perhaps due to the time-factor. It might be a combination of mid and dark celtic green. The artist deservers credit in painting the real domestic part of social life. The pose of the lady is very appropriate and The use of colours to make the appearance as real as possible has been to a great extent unique.

Fig. 4 shows a man with a drum. His turban is of vermilion with black. The dress-pattern seems to be influenced by the Mughal style.

The trousers have stripes of very light azure blue. Other stripes are not clear. A land scape has also been shown in the background, but that is very far and not very clear. The face is clear in light burnt sienna with black colour to bring the effect of light and shade. Except that, the artist has failed to bring the natural twists in gestures and postures while in action. The smiling face does not seems to have any correlation with the movement of eyes.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.

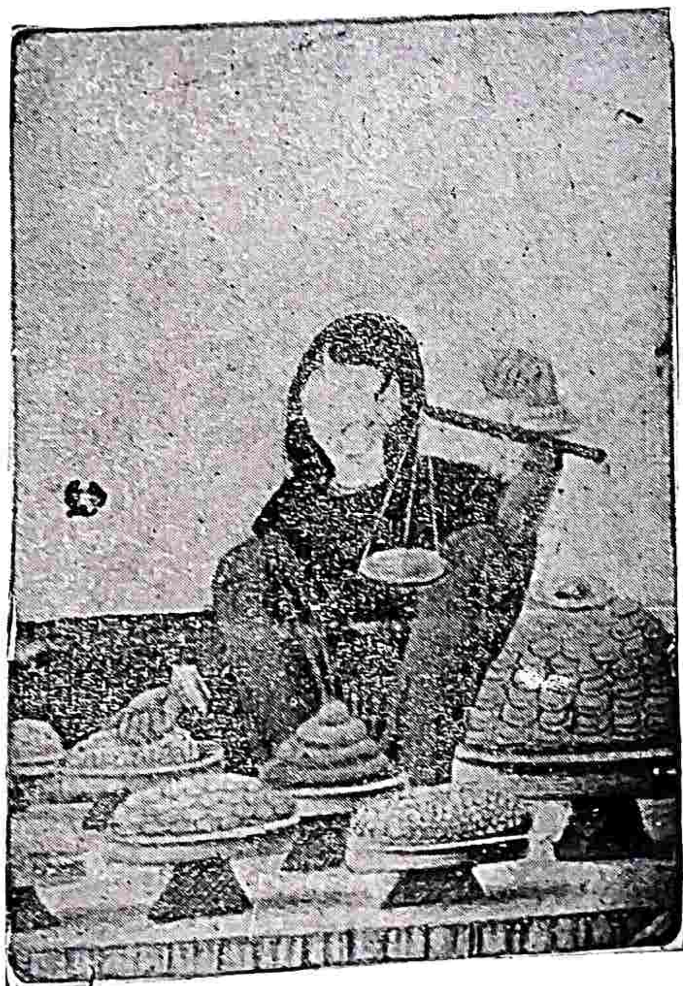


Fig. 14.

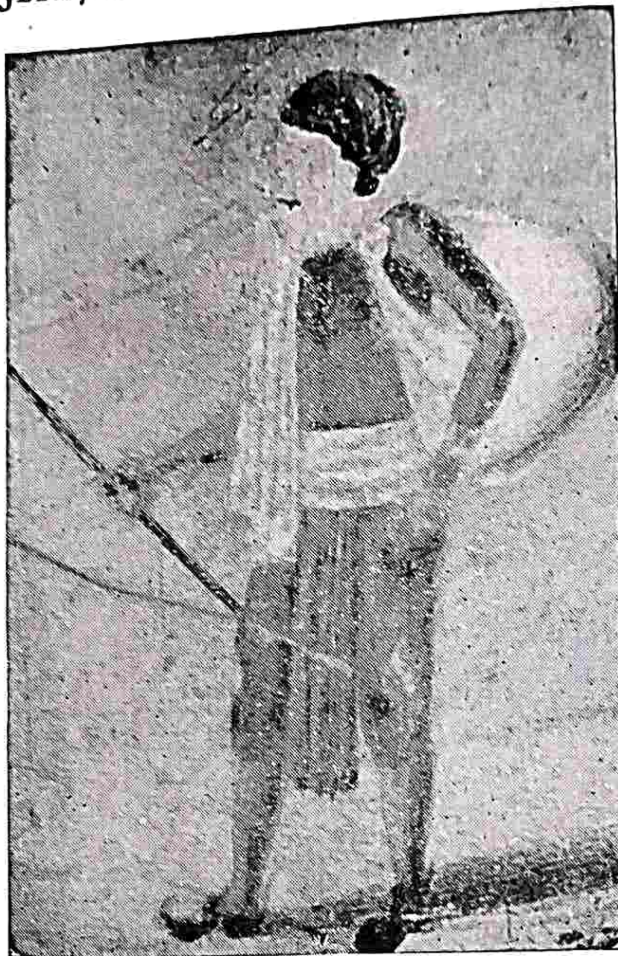


Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.

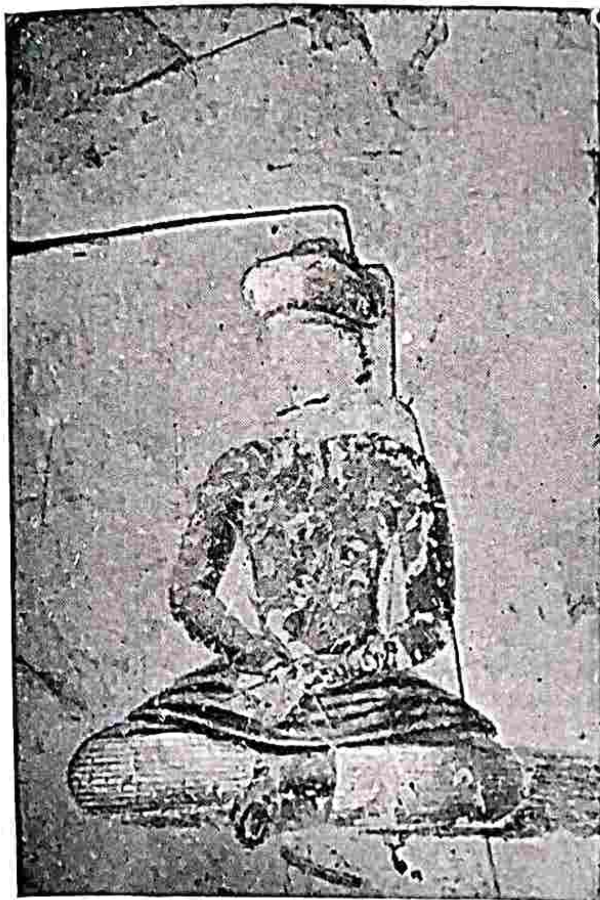


Fig. 17.



Fig. 18.



Fig. 19.



Fig. 20.



Fig. 21.



Fig. 22.



Fig. 23.

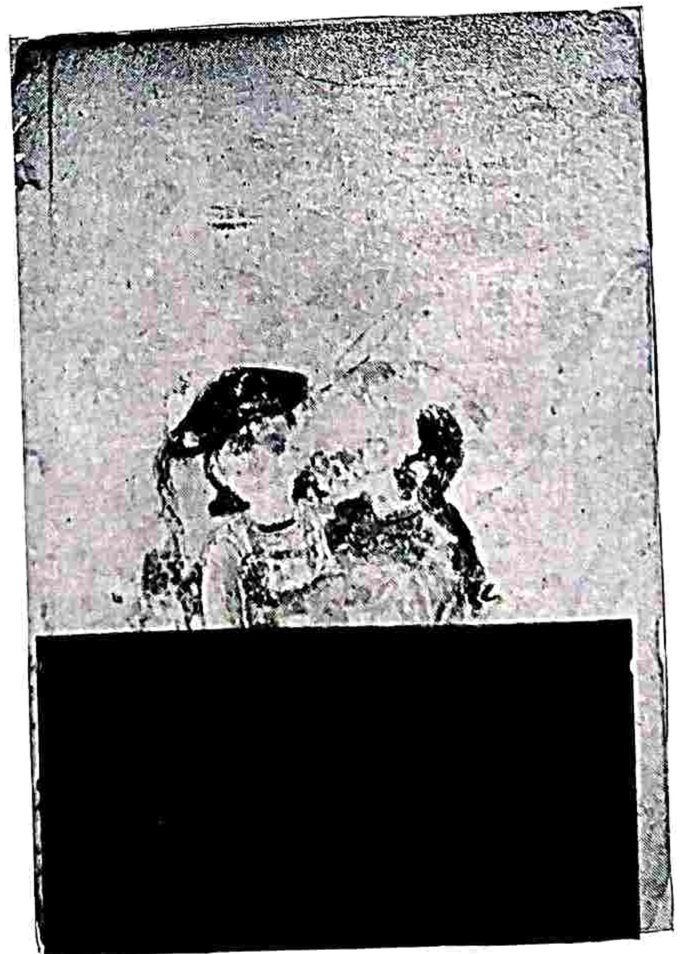


Fig. 24.

The figure 5 shows a man dressed up in a much better style with *sherwānī* of raw sienna and trousers of deep and light permanent bright blue. He has a cloth piece of white with cobalt blue over his *sherwānī* in the bourgeoise fashion. His turban is of a different type in deep and light carmine colour. His shoes are of peculiar Mughal style. The colour is not clear. He holds two beautiful things which might have been used to decorate rooms. These two look lovely. The colours used are light carmine, vermillion, white and light permanent blue. The artist has been successful in making the figure in a richer style. But the movement of right and left legs has not been correctly presented.

The figure 6 shows lady doing needlework. She has been dressed in *sārī* and *blouse*. The *sārī* is of deep and light oriental blue and *blouse* of crimson with black. The pose is quite natural. The face has disappeared and so, it is very difficult to understand the mood of the lady. She is shown sitting on a floor, which too has disappeared.

Figure 7 shows a potter at work. His pose is quite familiar. The face has disappeared. The brushwork is so fine that the disc still appears to be revolving. The angle of the stick with the disc further confirms the artist's maturity. He has been successful at least in painting a work—situation on so little a mica sheet.

Figure 8 shows another potter giving finishing touches to the vessels prepared. He is shown in full dress, with a turban in chrome yellow with shades of light photo brown, his *sherwānī* in white with cobalt blue and *dhoti* in photo brown. He has been shown working under the branch of a tree. This makes the situation quite natural because usually a potter does all this in open so that vessels could be dried up in sun. The leaves of the tree have not been shown separately. The brush has been so used that the impression is complete. Here the western influence is apparent.

Figure 9 shows a man blowing a musical instrument. The instrument appears to be quite sophisticated. But the pose is not natural. The face has not been shown with any expression. The eyes do not reflect a musical mood and the mouth of the instrument simply touches the lips as if all this is done for mere photography. The man has been shown standing in a landscape. The artist has failed in maintaining the balance between the proportion of the height of the man with distance of landscape, although the brush has been successful in giving the real look to the landscape of plane.

Figure 10 shows a man standing with a flag. The main colour of the flag is photo brown and the border is of deep and light mid green. The

paijāmā is in purple with the stripes of white. The background has not disappeared. One can easily appreciate the minute touches of the brush in preparation of a lively landscape with trees, little weeds and natural slopes. The human figure has heen shown just standing with eyes open but no definite expression. The placing of the right hand has been so detached from the stick of the flag that it neither indicates any official pose nor any personal intention.

Figure 11 shows a man standing with a musical instrument in his left hand. His face resembles much with the one of the figure 10. They have more or less the similar expression and are looking to the same direction. The *sherwānī*, here is no photo brown. The *paijāmā* is in white without any stripe. The landscape is spoilt, perhaps due to roughhandling in the mean time.

Figure 12 shows a man sitting on the floor and writing on a sheet of paper which is put on a table of convenient size and height. The face of the man is not present, but from turban to *dbotī*, the only colour used is white with light cobalt blue to make the appearance three dimensional with the effects of light and shade. The table is in light and deep chocolate brown, upon the table is there one layer, perhaps a cloth piece of deep mid green. Although the face has disappeared, yet the position of hands and the pose of the sitting, both confirm a definite action and attest to the maturity of the brush work.

Figure 13 shows a lady sitting on a domestic grinder. The design of the grinder is still the same used in the enterior areas of Maithila locality. The pose of the lady is also very familiar with the style seen in the localities of Mithilā. Her *sārī* is rolled upto the knee of the left leg and same with the right one. The placing of the left hand is so appropriate that it seems the artist must have been very closely associated with the domestic life of the area. Her *blouse* is in ermilion, bangles are also in the same colour. the *sārī* in art yellow with light vermilion in order to bring the light and shade effect and the grinder is in burnt sienna with black. The artist has been successful in painting an important hour of domestic life, and perhaps a common habit of the females of the area.

Figure 14 shows a lady sweet seller with a balance in her left hand and the right hand in a pose to put some sweat on the balance. Her upper cloth is in vermilion and the lower cloth in light purple with black. She has been shown with ornaments which indicate that this occupation might have been richly paying. Her earring is the usual Maithila "Karṇafūla" and the ornament of the nose too does not have a foreign look. Her face is

absent so it is difficult to say of the mood, but the description of the materials just carries one to a typical sweat-stall much away from the city life.

Figure 15 shows a washerman with a bundle of clothes on his back and a stick in the right hand. His *turban* is in carmine; *dhotī* in chrome yellow with vermilion and the bundle in white with light cobalt blue. The *dhoti* on both the legs goes only up to knee. This makes the picture true to the way of the life of the area. The washerman's face is absent, but the pose of the hands and the angle that the stick makes with the perpendicular bring reality to the whole situation.

Figure 16 shows a man sitting with a *dholaka. Dholaka* is a musical instrument of the area, which is used in a group song or group dance. The details of the *dholaka* are so nicely put, that no one can doubt the merit of the artist. The body of the *dholaka* has been painted in its natural colour—light chocolate brown with downward stripes of black showing the usual marks done by the carpenter. Tha body is always of wood. The sides of the body which are actually beaten to produce the musical sounds are alwas of some leather. This has been shown in its usual colour art yellow with little marks of black. The face is absent in this card also. The left hand is shown close to the leather while the right hand is in a motion to touch it. At the same time the two legs accomodate the *dholaka* in a very natural style. The dress-pattern of the man is not different from that of some others. The same *paijāmā*, *sherwānī* and turban with a cloth-piece like a girdle, all these make the dress complete.

Figure 17 shows a man sitting with two hands joint together. His *paijāmā* has been shown in beautiful stripes of white and light cobalt blue. This picture has been, perhaps, so badly handled by those who possessed it, that the face has disappeared, the body has also faintly disappeared and other things are also very less clear.

Figure 18 shows a man standing with a musical instrument very much like a *Shehnai*. His face is just like those who have been shown with other musical instruments. His *sherwānī* is in vermilion. The *paijāmā* is much improved in design. The landscape is not different from that in some other cards given before.

Figure 19 shows a man with the same facial cut and expression what is there in the fig. 17. The *sherwānī* is again in vermilion and the *paijāmā* is in white. One thing is very significant to note in this picture that this man has been shown with drums like instruments, which are beaten by little sticks to produce the musical sound. This combination is still patent for ceremonial function at the Maithila houses. This is known as

Khuradag. The artist has taken much care in giving the appropriate and real details to the description of this khuradog.

Fig. 20 shows a man sitting with a *masanad* and *hukkā*. Although his face has disappeared, yet from the space over which hairs in black are shown, one can derive that his skull must have been broad. His other physical features too are much differet from those of the persons shown in other pictures with musical instruments. His *dhotī* goes up to the ankle in his leg At the same time the style of wearing it also looks sophisticated. In his left hand, he has an armlet. This is known as "*chaukaṭhā*" in Maithilī. The *hukkā* is quite aristocratic and fits well with the situation. The artist has painted this life from the upper stratum of the then society.

Fig. 21 shows a man with a flag in photo-brown. His face is very similar to that of each of those with musical instruments. The expression is also not at all different. The dress-pattern is also the same except that the *sherwānī* in this picture is in white. The landscape has already much faded, still, one can notice no marked difference from the landscapes of other pictures.

Fig. 22 shows a man just standing with a stick. His dress is not different from that of others except that over his *sherwānī* there is one belt, which indicates that he might be some official. Even to-day this is used by the staff of the Government on duty.

Fig. 23 shows a man sitting under the branch of a tree with a bottle and a cup. The branch of the tree is not at all different in colour and structure from the branches already shown in some previous pictures. The man has been shown pouring something from the bottle into the cup. Although his face has faded totally, yet the pose he makes while sitting and the size as well as the disign of the cup indicate that he is pouring nothing but wine.

Figs. 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29 show the sex life of the couples. The faces in each card of both male and female partner have faded in such a way that it is very difficult to say the same couple is painted in the different poses on all the six cards. These poses do not reflect any connection with the knowledge of Vātsyāna's *Kāmasūtra*. The female partner has always been shown with all ornaments. The male partner has been also shown in full dress. The colours used are not different from those used in other previous pictures. Fig. 29 deserves special attention because the rest five have very little difference in pose from each other, but this one is entirely of a different style. Both the partners have been shown naked.



Fig. 25.



Fig. 26.

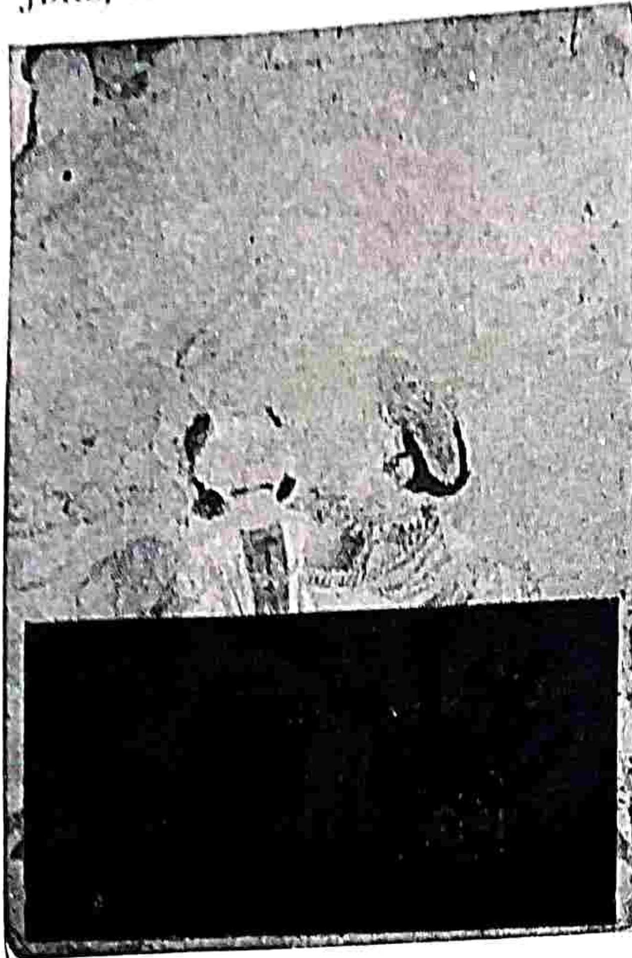


Fig. 27.

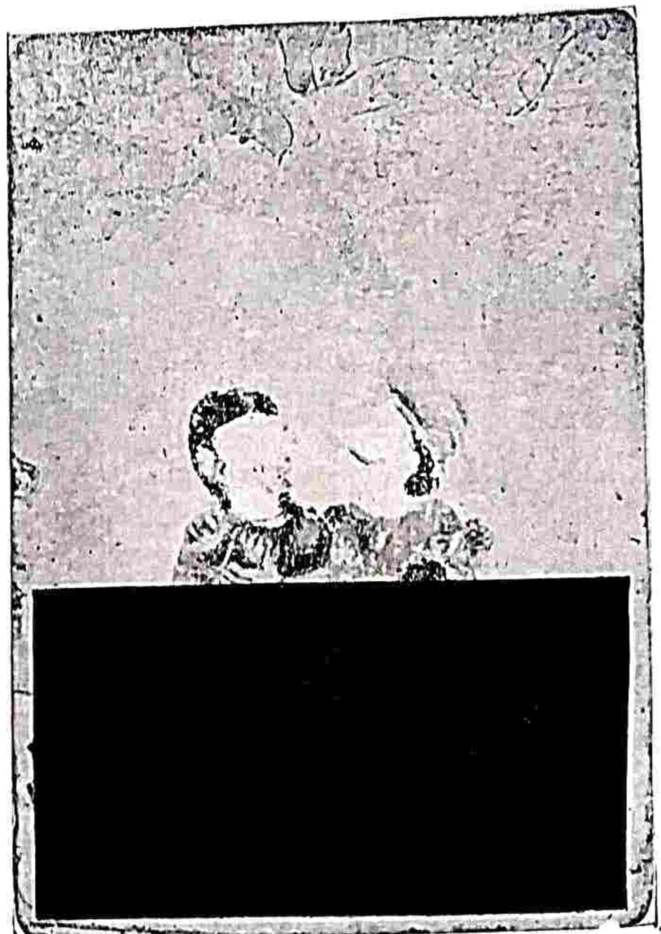


Fig. 28.



Fig. 29.



Fig. 30.

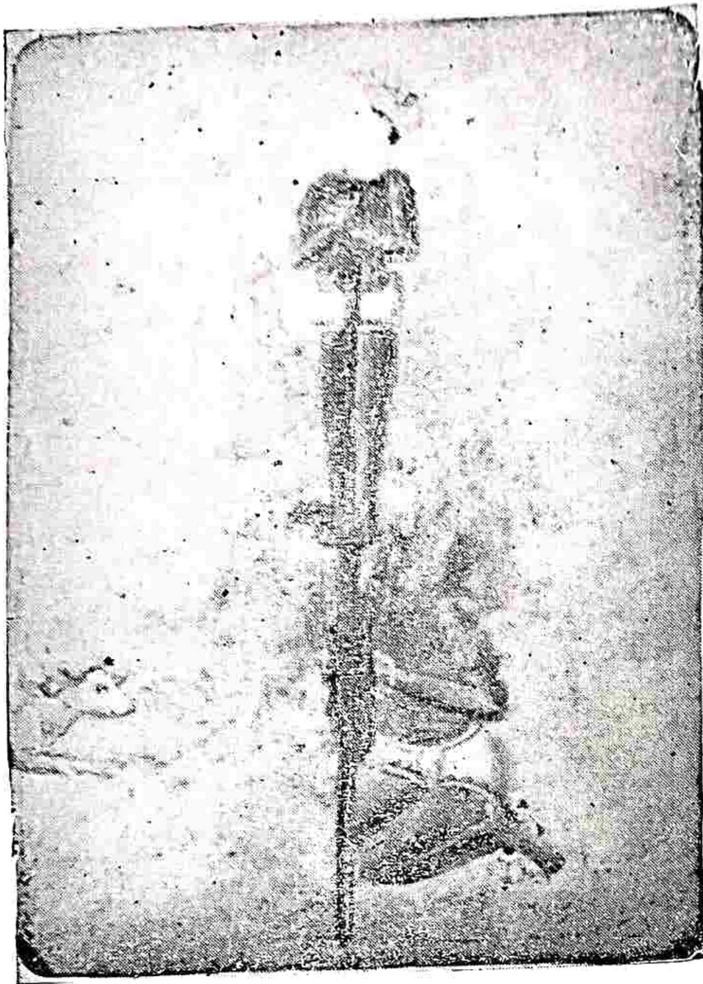


Fig. 31.

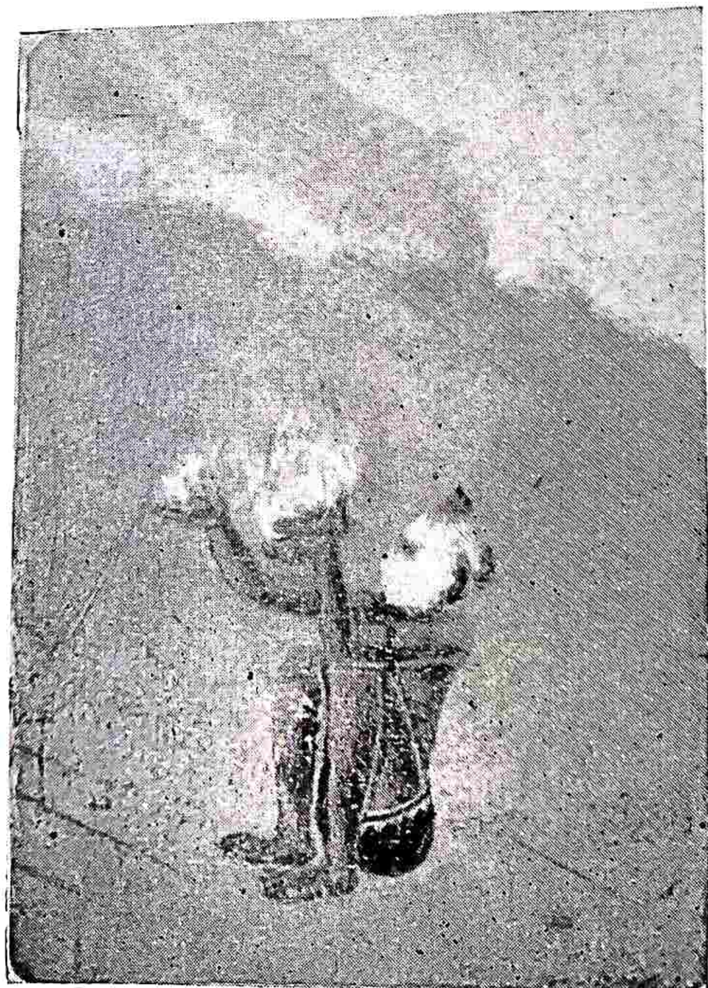


Fig. 32.

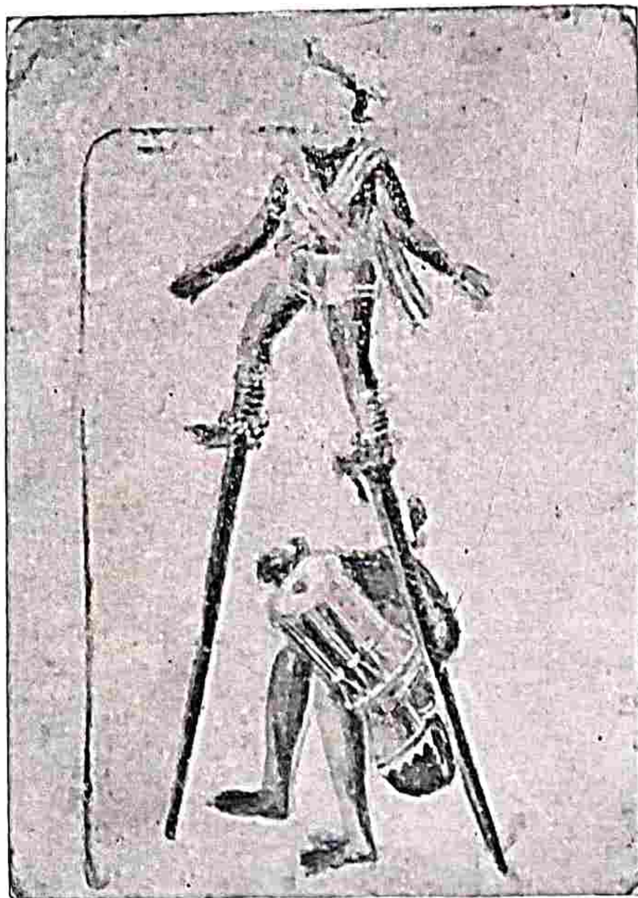


Fig. 33.

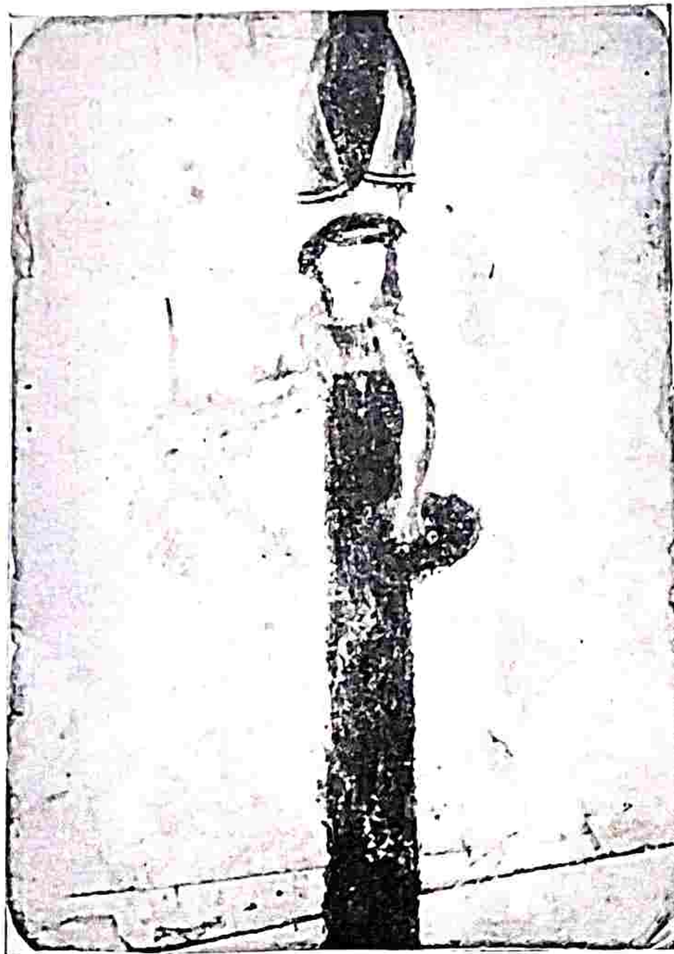


Fig. 34.

The face of the male partner has not fortunately faded, but that of the female partner is not at all clear. His face does not resemble with that of any other previously shown. The couple has been shown on a carpet of white and bronze blue stripes. The *masanads* have also been shown in beautiful colours like photo-brown, light carmine and vermilion. All this suggests that the artist chose same upper class sex life to paint.

Figs. 30, 31, 32, 33 and 34 show two persons in each except one (fig. 34) doing physical exercises for entertainment. Since these pictures have so much faded that no single face can be seen. Every one has only under-wear so for as the dress is concerned. This makes the situation quite realistic. All the persons have more or lass the same physical features. Colours used are not different from those done in previous pictures. Fig. 31 deserves some special attention, because one animal (perhaps a cow) has been shown in a mood as if it is moving. This confirms the artis's insight who takes held of an appropriate but little symbol, which alone is sufficient to make the situation real at the same time convenient enough to be accomodated in so little a card. Even to-day, there are people, who do such exercises for public entertainment. They are called "Naṭa". These Naṭas are a seprate caste and belong to the category of untouchables.

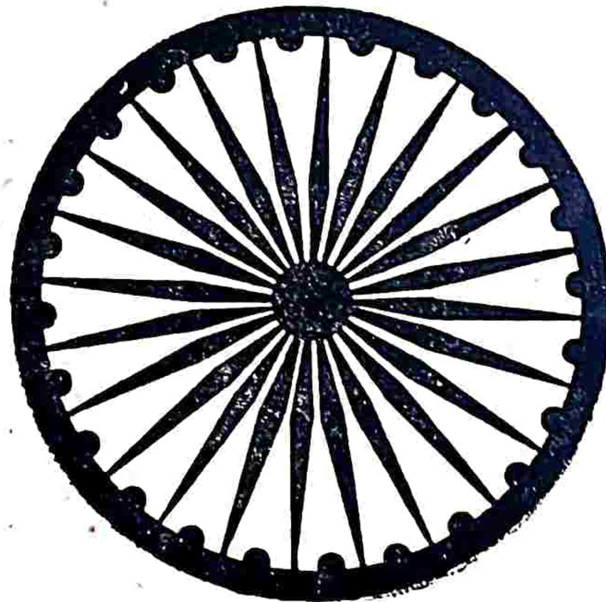
From all the pictures described above, one can easily collect some few points as merits as well as demerits. No human figure has been shown with correct anatomic details. But, the artist goes to the minutest point to make the situation effective. His brush work displays his insight of all walks of life with a rare distinction. With all this he fails to develop a psychology with his human figures. All these pictures represent a cross-section of the then social life as well as the society itself. Different occupations are there, different domestic habits are there and different sexual as well as recreational practices are also there. The artist has tried his best to present action rather than person, situation rather than space and finally a society rather than a myth.

THE JOURNAL
OF
THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY

VOL. LIV JANUARY—DECEMBER, 1968 PARTS I-IV

CHIEF EDITOR

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PUBLISHED BY

THE BIHAR RESEARCH SOCIETY, PATNA

Price Rs. 20/-